ASEAN: The Road From Bali

(Annual Conference of the Canadian Council of Southeast Asian Studies. Bethune College, York University. November 5 and 6, 1976)

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Two years ago, a news agency reported from Washington that a large map of Southeast Asia had been discovered lying derelict in a little-used corner of the Pentagon. The map was labelled "surplus," the report added. The symbolic significance of that situation applied far beyond the United States. It seemed to strengthen the growing conviction that the West, which had indeed "defined" the region - when the Allied Southeast Asia Command was formed at Quebec in August 1943 - now considered Southeast Asia a "surplus" area that could, or perhaps should, be subjected to a period of neglect.

That was a remarkable turn of events for a region whose history is very largely a record of exposure to and control by external influences. From 1511, when the Iberian vanguard established a Western presence in Malacca, until very recently, Western Powers exercised pre-eminent influence in Southeast Asia. They divided the region into spheres of colonial rule, superimposed a veneer of Christianisation on previously Sinicised or Indianised lands, and propelled the region towards industrial modernisation. Recent exceptions to this pattern were the temporary establishment of a so-called Sphere of Greater Co-Prosperity by Japan, and North Vietnam's decisive rejection of a return to Western colonial rule after World War II.

Stirrings of nationalistic and revolutionary fervour were felt in neighboring lands after the Second World War, but Western rule or influence returned to most of the area that now comprises the five-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) - Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Western influence lingered in a variety of forms and in many fields of activity, even after decolonisation.

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Four of the five Asean countries were offered the comfort of possible protection by and assistance from supervening Western powers. The incentive to think and act regionally in that context was minimal. So it is hardly surprising that many earlier attempts to set up regional organisations were abortive. Asean itself was greeted at its birth on Aug. 8, 1967 with some doubt about its mortality.

There have been occasions when those doubts seemed justified. The rate at which recommendations made by Asean's planners were implemented has been notoriously slow. None at all were seen through from proposal to action in Asean's first year, and the implementation rate took all of seven years to rise to 25 per cent. At the same time many causes of intra-Asean conflict persisted. The Filipino claim to Sabah, in Malaysia, was not dropped. The Philippines has alleged, too, that rebels in the southern Philippines were supported and supplied by Sabah. Clandestine activity on the Thai-Malaysia border by members of the Malayan Communist Party, and by Thailand's Muslim secessionists has sometimes resulted in friction between those two countries. An undercurrent of mutual suspicion was noted from time to time in relations between Indonesia and Singapore. In fact, Asean's survival is in itself an achievement that counterbalances the organisation's relatively slow pace of action. Asean's leaders like to point out that there have been moments of indecision or a lack of unanimity even within the European Economic Community and Comecon.

Today, there appears to be a strong regional sense in Asean countries. Asean tourism, Asean trade fairs, Asean publications, Asean studies and, of course, the Asean summit at Bali, are all manifestations of this feeling. In the words of Singapore's Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam: ".... Asean ideas

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and techniques have.... permeated national frontiers and national thinking.... Nowhere else in Asia today is there a coherent regional organisation like Asean...."

Asean's validity and viability as a regional organisation have been recognised by Australia, the European Economic Community, Japan and, more recently, by Canada. Asean's survival and its emergence as a potential instrument of regional policy rather than a fashionable doctrine can be traced in large measure to the rethinking that took place in Asean's capitals against the background of dwindling Western involvement in Southeast Asia. A region considered "surplus" must necessarily feel impelled to draw sustenance from within itself.

Consider these juxtapositions of cause and effect. In November 1967, Britain said it would "withdraw altogether" from its bases in Singapore and Malaysia by 1971. Two months after Mr. Harold Wilson's announcement, Tun Dr. Ismail, who was to serve later as his country's Deputy Prime Minister, told Malaysia's National Assembly that the time was ripe for Southeast nations to adopt policies of neutrality and peaceful co-existence, pledging themselves not to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, and stating their willingness to accept whatever form of government another country chose to adopt.

In July 1969, Mr. Richard Nixon announced what was later to be known as the Guam Doctrine, which implied that the messianic period of American involvement on the Southeast Asian mainland would be phased out. In April 1970, Tan Sri Ghazali Shafi urged the preparatory meeting in Dar-es-Salaam for the Lusaka summit meeting of non-aligned nations to seek the neutralization of Indo-China and the whole of Southeast Asia under guarantees from China, the Soviet Union

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and the United States. The next year, on November 27, 1971, Asean's Foreign Ministers, meeting in Kuala Lumpur, formally declared that the neutralization of Southeast Asia was "a desirable objective" and agreed to "explore ways and means of bringing about its realisation."

The Washington-Hanoi Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam was signed on January 27, 1973. Shortly thereafter President Marcos of the Philippines suggested that an Asian Forum, attended by all Asian heads of government, be convened, to discuss the "full implications of the peace in Vietnam." Foreign Secretary Carlos P. Romulo placed this proposal before Asean's Foreign Ministers at their Kuala Lumpur meeting in February. The practicability of the proposal was questioned, and the ministers finally resolved that such a conference should be held "at an appropriate time." That agreement was reconfirmed by the Foreign Ministers at their meeting in Pattaya, Thailand, one year later.

By mid-1975, the American presence in Indo-China had been abruptly dismantled. Towards the end of that year, official sources in Jakarta quietly and informally proposed to their Asean colleagues that the organisation should aim for an Asean summit at which heads-of-government could assess the region's political and economic situation, and set out guidelines for a new phase of active regional co-operation. Bali, famed among tourist promoters and seekers after an undefined "eastern mystique" alike, was suggested as a suitable site. Intense diplomatic interchanges in Asean capitals followed, and it was during the funeral ceremonies in Kuala Lumpur for Tun Abdul Razak, the late Prime Minister of Malaysia, that agreement was finally reached - at a series of hotel-room consultations among Asean leaders who were in Malaysia for the obsequies.

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Thus, almost nine years after Asean was formed, the stage was set for the association's first summit meeting. For Asean's leaders, the road to Bali was strenuous. They had barely emerged from such divisive episodes as Indonesia's confrontation with Malaysia, and Singapore's separation from the Malaysian Federation, when the association was formed, with both hope and diffidence. In the intervening years they faced such traumatic experiences as the British withdrawal from the region; new directions in international relations that destroyed the premises on which some of their own policies and practices were based; threats to domestic stability; international economic trends such as a fourfold increase in oil prices, and the bizarre combination of worldwide inflation and recession that upset their own economic calculations. Asean's leaders like to call themselves "pragmatic," and it is a measure of their pragmatism that faced with difficulties and the need for adaptation to a range of new realities, they decided to approach these tasks firmly and in union; to get on top of the situation and not just be influenced by it. The emphasis at Bali, it was hoped, would be on jayadiri -- standing on one's own feet.

The Bali summit meeting took place on February 23 and 24, 1976, under the chairmanship of President Suharto, the host-country's head-of-government. Other participating heads-of-government were welcomed with formal ceremonies reserved in Indonesia's history for the triumphant homecoming of victorious warriors. The mood prevailing was euphoric, according to all reporters covering the event, and the heady spirit of great expectations was captured by Thailand's then Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj who said: "The beauty and serenity of Bali should inspire confidence. In Paradise, one never fails, I hear...." As a matter of fact, Bali's paradisiacal ambience notwithstanding,

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the summit meeting came close to collapse. That it did not, was partly the result of a capacity for compromise that has gradually developed in intra-Asean relations, and partly an indication that Asean's leaders were committed to making a success of their meeting, giving regional co-operation a new momentum. "Healthy argument on ways and means to our agreed goals is a sign of vigorous life in Asean," commented Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, whose suggestion that the summit should approve an across-the-board 10 per cent tariff cut in intra-Asean trade raised vigorous objections from Indonesia. "It is the role of heads of government to demolish the barriers of distrust and suspicion between our states," said President Marcos of the Philippines whose proposal for setting up machinery for compulsory, automatic arbitration of intra-Asean disputes was hotly resented by Malaysia.

It is interesting that these differences did not actually surface at formal meetings between the heads-of-government. Contradictory views were stated at meetings of officials who had, in fact, spent three painstaking months preparing draft documents for signing. When disputes could not be resolved at that level, they were submitted to the Foreign Ministers who accompanied their heads-of-government to Bali. When the Foreign Ministers could not settle an issue, they referred the problem to the heads-of-government concerned who talked things over on pleasant golf course fairways, or during an informal visit at one of the ritzy tourist cottages in which Indonesia housed its guests. When heads-of-government met in formal session, they could indulge in grand eloquence, ceremoniously sign the documents placed before them, and generally conduct themselves in a spirit of manifest goodwill. This intricate and perhaps cumbersome procedure is considered the typically Asean style. It has the advantage of precluding angry confrontation between leaders

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whose statements and commitments in a flash of anger would, by virtue of their office, remain irrevocable. Bureaucrats, on the other hand, could slug it out verbally in the knowledge that they were not speaking for themselves, and simmer down over beer and satay when it was all over.

The Bali summit did not give harrassed headline writers in Asean's capitals and elsewhere the convenience of a "breakthrough." It did not produce decisions that turn points or make epochs in human history. It did not satisfy Asean's economic managers who had hoped that the ground would be laid at the summit, beginning with a 10 per cent tariff cut, for free trade arrangements. It did not satisfy regional political commentators and others who had hoped for dramatic announcements on matters such as security, mutual defence, and political stability. On the other hand, the summit meeting did not come apart at the seams. Deliberations, wherever they were held, were conducted in a spirit of give-and-take, resulting in musjawara, or consensus, the region's traditional technique of political decision-making. Hongkong's Far Eastern Economic Review described the Bali meeting as a "subtle success." Singapore's Straits Times said that as a result of the meeting Asean has "taken on some flesh and sinew." The documents signed at Bali were "unique" and "would make further progress in achieving Asean's goals possible," said Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Hussein at the summit's closing ceremony. The results of the Bali meeting. President Suharto added, were "further proof" of Asean's "determination to chart (its) own future, and not let undesirable external factors interfere in the solution of (its) problems."

The diplomatic equipment with which Asean's leaders armed themselves for the long journey on the road from Bali were a Declaration of Asean Concord, a Treaty of Amity and Co-operation, and a Joint Communique. There is some

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element of overlap in these three documents, but they must be considered as a whole, because read together they constitute a new Asean Charter. The Bali documents in effect replace the Bangkok Charter of August 1967 as the rulebook for Asean's activities from now on.

Five keynote areas of decision emerge from the Bali documents: Institutional strengthening, Intra-Asean Conciliation, Economic Co-operation, Political Stability, and Peaceful Extra-Asean Relations. The decisions taken under these headings provide Asean with a number of goals for the future. Some of those objectives are limited but, overall, more substantive than those set out in the very general terms of the Bangkok Charter.

Asean's heads-of-government formally agreed to establish an Asean Secretariat in Jakarta, headed by a Secretary General, Lieutenant-General Dharsono of Indonesia. The task of co-ordinating Asean's activities will henceforth fall on Gen. Dharsono and his regionally-recruited staff. Centralised management of Asean's endeavours will replace, and presumably be more effective than, the loose system of consultation hitherto carried out by 11 Permanent Committees and five special committees.

The Bali documents require that each member of Asean should not conduct itself in any manner or participate in any activity that would threaten the territorial integrity of a fellow-member, or members. Should that commitment be broken, however, the dispute could go to a ministerial High Council, called into "continuing session" and empowered to recommend "appropriate means of settlement" including "good offices, mediation, inquiry or conciliation." A High Council will be set up only with the unanimous consent of the disputants.

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Undoubtedly, these provisions create a less than perfect legal framework within which disputes might be resolved. The procedure suffers from the exclusion of automatic arbitration - proposed by the Philippines - and makes no mention of "sanctions" or other appropriate correctives that could be applied to settle intra-regional disputes swiftly. But a system of voluntary arbitration represented the closest possible convergence of contending views, and the compromise is backed by the unanimous support it received at Bali. Had tough conciliation measures been adopted and subsequently proved unenforceable, they would hardly have been worth the paper on which they were written. As Datuk Hussein Onn, the strongest opponent of compulsory arbitration, said: "It would have been easy to reach blind but meaningless agreements." The procedure adopted has vision - vision born of commitment to conciliation and unity, even if it does lack muscle.

At pre-summit meetings, Asean's Foreign Ministers and officials had agreed "in principle" that a free trade zone would be a highly desirable objective. At Bali, this approach to regional economic co-operation was actively pushed by Singapore and the Philippines -- and, resolutely resisted by Indonesia. The Indonesian view was that free trade arrangements would benefit members unequally unless they were instituted only after the five Asean countries had all reached compatible levels of industrialisation. The Bali documents restated free trade as a long-term objective. For the immediate future, Asean would adopt "appropriate regional strategies" in such areas as mutual assistance to obtain a regular flow of basic commodities, particularly food and energy; co-operation in trade and exchange dealings; and the pursuit of joint efforts to secure advantageous terms in the world's market places and from international trading or economic institutions.

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It was also agreed at Bali that future economic co-operation should be guided, as far as practicable, by the United Nations report on "Economic Co-operation for Asean," prepared at Asean's request some five years ago. For instance, in naming industrial projects that could be established under complementarity arrangements or package deals, the Bali documents virtually repeated the UN report's list -- urea, superphosphates, potash, petrochemicals, steel, soda ash, newsprint and rubber products.

The responsibility for giving tangible form to the various economic proposals made and principles outlined at Bali was vested in Asean's Economic Ministers. Although Asean was founded as an instrument of economic rather than political co-operation, the highest previous contacts were made by Foreign Ministers who met annually to consider a formal agenda of economic affairs. During the last few years, the Foreign Ministers also discussed common political interests, but informally, and after the official economic agenda had been completed. To keep the distinction clear, the Foreign Ministers' review of economic issues was summarised in a Joint Communiqué; their political discussions were the subject of a press release. While this arrangement served to underscore Asean's interest in economic co-operation, the discussions of regional economic issues were unfortunately not held by Ministers empowered to act on the conclusions when they got home. This was a serious defect, and has now been corrected. Meetings of Asean's Economic Ministers will be held "regularly or as deemed necessary," placing responsibility for economic action where it properly belongs.

The first such meeting was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on March 8 and 9, hard on the heels of the Bali summit. The Ministers resolved that four types of medium-sized industry should be undertaken: urea in Indonesia and Malaysia, diesel engines in Singapore, soda ash in Thailand, and superphosphates in the

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Philippines. Not surprisingly, non-government groups have been quick to sense and follow the official attitude. Asean bankers meeting in Singapore last August decided to try for an Asean Clearing Union. Similar co-operation is expected among shippers, traders, and industrialists. Plans for an Asean Development Journal are underway. Meanwhile, scientists and other research personnel will continue their linked efforts in such fields as housing, post-harvest technology, and family planning.

In another area, fairly firm links have been forged down the years by the security and intelligence organisations of Asean countries. Malaysia and Indonesia have for several years conducted successful joint security operations in Kalimantan. A Malaysian newspaper editor detained in Kuala Lumpur some months ago on charges of communist subversion was arrested partly as a result of evidence said to have been obtained during one of his visits to Indonesia. A Briton suspected of complicity in a plot to assassinate President Marcos was jailed in Singapore. Co-operation between Thai and Malaysian security forces on their joint border is tricky, perhaps because Thai officials are more concerned about the activity of Muslim secessionists than with tracking down members of the Malayan Communist Party who return to jungle redoubts in Thailand after their forays in Malaysia. A Thai-Malaysian border security agreement broke down some weeks after the Bali summit on the issue of "hot pursuit" but border security operations continue.

All these arrangements take place outside the ambit of Asean, and security and intelligence personnel have privately stated their conviction that political stability could be best ensured by a formal joint agreement -- in other words, a defence pact. This attitude to security and stability has been resisted by

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Asean's leaders, notably by President Suharto. At Bali Asean's leaders reconfirmed their view. They agreed, too, that the way to security lies nbt only through counterinsurgency operations but also in sustained attempts to reduce, if not eliminate, economic and social conditions in which insurgent movements thrive.

Security sweeps will undoubtedly continue. Domestic anti-communism is sometimes phobic in Asean's capitals. Domestic politics is not expected to intrude into external relations, however. Asean's member-governments have learned to separate domestic considerations from the imperatives of foreign policy. So, while counterinsurgency and security operations continue at home, Asean's members are expected to continue with their efforts, jointly and separately, to strengthen or improve relations with China and Vietnam.

By stating that membership in Asean would be open to other states in South-east Asai, and by reinvoking the association's Declaration of Neutrality, the Bali summit sought to convince both neighbours and distant powers that Asean wishes to be at peace with them all. The goal of establishing a "Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality" in the Asean area cannot, of course, be reached without the agreement of the world's major powers. Future relations with the states of Indo-China, meanwhile, cannot be assessed with any degree of certainty. The states of Indo-China have responded to soundings made separately by Asean's member-states but have been less than enthusiastic about joint Asean approaches. These included last year's proposal by Asean that all its members, on the one side, and Kampuchea on the other, should normalise relations simultaneously; and Asean's offers to participate in the reconstruction of Vietnam.

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On the eve of the Bali summit, North Vietnam charged that the meeting was mounted by the US as "part of its schemes of intervention and aggression" against the countries of Indo-China. After the summit meeting, Hanoi said that "the time is very good for the struggle of Southeast Asian peoples," and described a revolutionary course in the region as being "in line with the law of the evolution of history." No "reactionary force" could thwart the "struggle," which was "fully supported" by the Vietnamese people. Asean's reaction was to stress its own indestructibility.

At the conference of nonaligned heads of state and government held in Colombo, Sri Lanka last August, the Vietnamese delegation had opposed acceptance of the Asean Declaration at Colombo only because Asean had adopted the declaration at a time when some members of the association "were directly or indirectly serving the US aggressive war in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, in complete contravention of the principles of the nonaligned movement." Hanoi apparently is not fully convinced about Asean's good faith. Asean's leaders, living as they do so close to Vietnam, no doubt remember somewhat uneasily that Japan's air assault on Kota Bharu in Malaysia, which preceded Japan's occupation of then Malaya and Singapore, was launched from a Japanese airbase in southern Vietnam. So Hanoi and Asean are going to watch each other closely - and that certainly will be an interesting process to observe in the post-Bali years.

One can look at the Bali documents as relatively light equipment for Asean's leaders on the road from Bali; short on detail, long on political and economic philosophy. One can, conversely, see them as suited to their purpose because they were not pushed through by a truculent majority, but accepted by consensus. One can, moreover, argue that it is wise to travel light: unnecessary equipment can be discarded and replaced with suitable

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substitutes. It is useful to remember, too, that there is nothing in any document that makes a document work, as Henry Kissinger once said in another context. "A document works only because the parties concerned intend to implement it and, therefore, all it can do is to prescribe what the obligations of the various parties are...." The words that came from Bali are on record. Now it is the performance of the participants, and the consequences of their performance, that count.
